

Percentage of Medical Students with Disabilities Higher than Thought, Study Finds

By [Laura Kurtzman \(https://www.ucsf.edu/bio/laura-kurtzman\)](https://www.ucsf.edu/bio/laura-kurtzman) on December 07, 2016

The percentage of medical students with disabilities has always been much lower than the general population, but there may be more disabled students than previously thought.

In the first look at the broad range of disabilities, from learning to physical, researchers at UC San Francisco and Johns Hopkins found that 2.7 percent of medical students

have some sort of disability, which is higher than previous estimates of 0.3 percent to 0.6 percent, but still well below the 19 percent prevalence in the general population.

Researchers collected data from 1,547 disabled students at 89 medical schools: 34 percent reported attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, 22 percent reported learning disabilities, and 20 percent reported psychological disabilities.

“Our data suggests there are more medical students with disabilities than we thought, yet programs are likely to be unaware of a student’s status, since most have non-apparent disabilities,” said senior author [Lisa Meeks, \(http://profiles.ucsf.edu/lisa.meeks\)](http://profiles.ucsf.edu/lisa.meeks) PhD, assistant professor of medicine and director for [Medical Student Disability Services \(http://meded.ucsf.edu/msds\)](http://meded.ucsf.edu/msds) at UCSF. She conducted the study, published in [JAMA \(http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2589334\)](http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2589334) on Dec. 6, 2016, with Kurt Herzer, PhD, MSc, of Johns Hopkins School of Medicine.

“We suspect the number may be higher, since many students choose not to disclose non-apparent disabilities, such as learning and psychological disabilities,” Meeks said. “Fear of stigma and



concerns over residency placement and privacy lead many students to remain silent about their disability and disability-related needs.”

Meeks said MD/PhD programs that are funded by National Institutes of Health (NIH), are required to actively recruit and develop plans for retaining students with disabilities to maintain their grant funding. But she said creating a culture of inclusion has many other benefits, such as increasing the likelihood that a disabled patient is cared for by a disabled physician, which has been shown to improve patient compliance and satisfaction, as well as health outcomes.



Lisa Meeks, PhD

Still, the study found a wide range in the percentage of disabled students that schools reported, varying from zero to 12 percent.

“We don’t know why, but anecdotal reports suggest it may have to do with how welcoming the programs were toward these students,” she said.

UCSF has been a leader in advocating for disabled medical students, contributing to the development of disability service provider practices through its support of the Coalition for Disability Access in Health Science and Medical Education, which supports more than 250 members across the country.

UCSF also produced open-access educational resources, including a joint Association of American Medical Colleges/UCSF webinar series on disability education. The coalition has also joined with the Association for Higher Education and Disability to develop training programs based on the UCSF model.